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## Believing in Lockland

After years of losing plants, jobs and population, the once-thriving village is finally gaining respect

BY KIMBALL PERRY | ENQUIRER STAFF WRITER

In 1998, Randy and Rochelle Persons left Sarasota, Fla., to seek their fortune - in Lockland.

Yes, that Lockland.

The Lockland that, to those passing on Interstate 75, looms like an industrial relic, its factories closed.

The Persons were, in a way, pioneers. In the years since they arrived, Lockland has begun to reverse its decline, taking its first steps to becoming what one developer called "the 21st century Lockland."

A sightseer might not be impressed. The village's main streets are mostly empty, lined with closed businesses. But the numbers - and local residents - tell a story of a changing suburb.

"I'm finally starting to see things turn around," said Randy Persons, 48, who owns Shelly's Papa Zita Pizza on Dunn Street.

Added Jim Brown, Lockland's mayor for the past 25 years: "I definitely feel like we're on an upswing."

In a county that has lost almost one of every eight residents since 1970, county officials see Lockland's rebirth - tentative as it is - as a hopeful sign.

"Lockland's being able to turn it around is certainly an indication that other communities can do that," said Ron Miller, executive director of the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission.

The evidence from Hamilton County and Lockland officials:

Companies have invested more than \$32 million in the village in the past decade.

More than 700 jobs were added with those investments.

A Marathon convenience store that opened in April 2005 was the first retail site built within the village in more than 20 years.

A clock tower was erected across from village hall in 1999, part of a public plaza.

Lockland had zero permits to build single-family residences from 1996 to 2002, two in 2003 and six in 2004. Now, a 52-home subdivision, Westview Park, is planned in the village's north end.

Developer Will Korte is one of Lockland's believers. He bought the former Jefferson Smurfit factory along I-75 and converted it into a "flex building" campus. Now called Lockland Commerce Park, it is home to about three dozen light industrial and distribution companies with hundreds of employees - and more on the way.

"You won't see smokestacks and cooling towers," he said. "It's the 21st-century Lockland."

### SPATE OF PLANT CLOSINGS

As a struggling "first suburb," Lockland isn't alone, locally and nationally.

A report out last month from the Brookings Institution, a think tank in Washington, D.C., listed Hamilton County as one of 64 in

the country that are home to "first suburbs" - the older, inner ring that grew up around urban cores.

As much as 20 percent of the U.S. population lives in first suburbs, including about 150,000 in Hamilton County.

A First Suburbs Consortium was established in the county in January 2005. It promotes political and governmental help to the areas, often ignored because they aren't part of the urban core or the thriving outer ring of newer suburbs.

Lockland was once a thriving village. Geographically smack in the middle of Hamilton County, Lockland grew up next to the Miami-Erie Canal. The village got its name from the locks on the canal, a waterway used to deliver goods to and from paper mills and other plants.

The locks closed in 1929, and the canal gradually was replaced by I-75. Like the waterway, the interstate meant easy access - bringing even more factories, businesses and jobs. Its population peaked in 1950 at just over 5,700, about 2,000 more than today.

## **MORE JOBS LEAVE**

But gradually, the factories started going dark.

In the early 1990s, the village lost more than 2,000 jobs to plant closings. The closings hurt smaller businesses, which relied on income from the workers to survive, and diminished taxes that the village needed to provide basic services.

Paper goods maker Jefferson Smurfit closed in 1994, cutting earnings tax revenues by a quarter. Celotex, a company that made roofing shingles for 140 years, exited in 2000. Mattress maker Stearns & Foster left in 2003.

Finances became so bad that in September 2003, Lockland requested that the Ohio auditor's office place it on "fiscal watch" - a designation that the village was facing an emergency.

"We had to either do something or go dead," said Jim Lothian, 75, Lockland's treasurer for 12 years beginning in the early 1990s. "We went through a terrible time there for a while. All the factories were closed and torn down," he said.

Lockland was headed toward oblivion - symbolized by the 1997 implosion of the smokestack on the Jefferson Smurfit plant.

## **LAND, LAND, LAND**

Those empty factories and businesses sat on land, more than 100 acres. The land, combined with the easy access to the rest of Ohio and the Midwest via I-75, caught the attention of developers - and gave village leaders hope.

First, though, many of those properties had to be cleaned up. Asbestos, lead, arsenic and other environmental hazards left by the factories had to be removed.

In 1998, Lockland won one of Ohio's first brownfield grants - \$1 million to cover the cleanup.

That, Brown insisted, was the most important move in beginning Lockland's turnaround. Lockland also recruited aggressive village managers - including Yvonne Kovach and former Hamilton County Administrator Dave Krings - who actively sought grants and promoted redevelopment efforts.

## **DEVELOPERS ATTRACTED**

Korte was watching.

He and other developers began working with the Hamilton County Development Co., the private, nonprofit economic development arm of Hamilton County government. HCDC works with the government to offer tax abatements and other incentives to lure companies, hoping they stay and provide long-term jobs and economic benefits.

"It's almost a complete turnaround," Krings said. "Now we're starting to get jobs back."

HCDC and the tax abatements have helped bring more than \$32.5 million in investment and more than 700 jobs in the last decade, development corporation manager Harry Blanton said.

"The willingness of the village to understand that there was a shift in the economy and to offer incentives was vital," he said.

Another developer plans to break ground on a 52-home subdivision this spring. Homes will range from \$140,000 to \$200,000.

"We're hoping that start-up, young professionals will take those kinds of houses," Brown said.

They also could attract families and bring more students to the school system, which almost had to close its doors in 2004 because of lagging enrollment. The district now has a "continuous improvement" designation from the Ohio Department of Education, the middle of the five state rankings.

## SMALL AND FRIENDLY

The Persons felt the attraction.

When they moved from Sarasota, they came to the area for a business venture that fell through. Because they'd already bought a house, they decided to stay.

"We looked in Lockland, we looked in Wyoming. There was just something, it's hard to put into words, about Lockland," Persons said.

"We were really drawn to the area. We decided to give it five years and see what happens."

He likes his increased carryout business and the way people wave to him and his wife on the street.

"We looked for a small town with a really friendly atmosphere," said Persons, a native of New Carlisle, a village in Ohio's Clark County outside Springfield. "Lockland just happened to be the place."

E-mail [kperry@enquirer.com](mailto:kperry@enquirer.com)